# Azerbaijan: How Equitable is Access to Higher Education?

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## BACKGROUND

The Higher Education system in Azerbaijan has not seen the kind and extent of transformation in terms of governance, finance or organizational structure in educational institutions that have taken place in most other transition countries of Europe and Central Asia (ECA). The Government of Azerbaijan's (GOA) first major education reform initiative since the collapse of the USSR came after the Education Reform Program of 1999, whose primary focus was the quality and relevance of general education. Higher education, however, was not in the priority list until the country joined the Bologna Process in May 2005.

The Presidential Decree of January 31, 2008 on the "Integration of higher education institutions (HEIs) of the Azerbaijan Republic into the European Higher Education Area" heralded the beginning of major reforms in the higher education sector. The decree ushered the introduction of numerous initiatives in public universities, such as the credit system and changes in the curricula, as well as the assessment of student performance. In 2009, the Cabinet of Ministers revised the list of higher education specialties and reduced the number of specialization areas from about 515 to 150 in line with the requirements of the Bologna Process. Finally, in 2009, the Government introduced the State Program on Reforms in Higher Education (2009-2013) which sought to strengthen the regulatory framework, governance and finance, as well as improve the content of higher education. A key change brought about by this program was the government's long anticipated decision to allow private universities to be a part of the government-funded voucher program for the first time in 2010, whereas previously only public universities were the recipients of this state subsidy. Conceptually, the newly introduced program aimed to give students greater freedom in choosing the university they want to attend. However, this incentive mechanism, like all other reform initiatives, was applied to a tightly regulated market, which lacked the preconditions needed for the voucher program to spur competition in the higher

education sector, hence its minimal impact. Continued government price control exercised over tuition policies in public schools and strict student admission quotas imposed on both public and private universities, large state subsidies provided to public universities, as well as the high rate of value added tax imposed on private higher education institutions are all but a few of the conditions that contribute to the current market failure in the higher education sector. The long list of the government's regulatory functions in the higher education system has seen little meaningful change in the past 20 years, this is quite indicative of the general perception that the government is disinclined to loosen its control over universities or deregulate the higher education market for the near future. Although Azerbaijan has gradually stepped up its efforts to identify and address the challenges and barriers to competition in the higher education sector, the fundamental flaws in the approach to higher education reforms in Azerbaijan are serious impediments and have yet to be eliminated. In particular, Azerbaijan lacks a comprehensive and proactive policy analysis to feed the decision-making process in areas critical to the efficient functioning of the education sector. This is a major setback as it undermines the Government's capability to fully comprehend and tackle challenges or effectively prioritize reform initiatives in the higher education sector, and has also led to major problems in areas such as equity remain invisible to the higher education community.

## ASPECTS OF INEQUITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

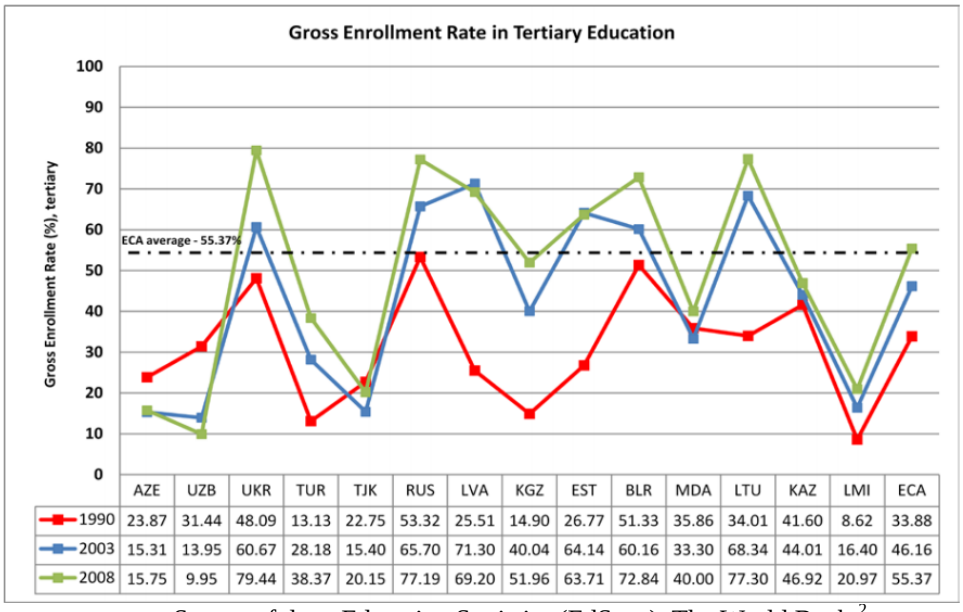
Ideally, all reform initiatives introduced by the Government aim to have a positive impact on the quality and relevance of education in the country. But a crucial area I would like to focus on here is that of equity in accessing higher education, which has been paid little attention to but then again is crucial to ensure that the reforms benefit all citizens in a fair manner. Azerbaijan's Constitution and its Law on Education have set forth principles that guarantee a universal right to education and allow for no discrimination of age, gender, race or ethnicity in accessing higher education. However, the equality of rights alone, devoid of the proper measures to ensure equitable distribution of opportunities and choices across various groups, doesn't always lead to socially desirable outcomes, but only to excessive inequality in the distribution of public goods.

The rapid increase in higher education participation rates particularly in private institutions and the establishment of new public HEIs observed in most transition countries, such as Poland and Georgia, as well as in neighboring Turkey, has not been the case in Azerbaijan. Actually, Azerbaijan's higher education market

remains to be supply-driven and the country has one of the lowest tertiary gross enrollment rates (about 16%)[1] in the region owing to the fact that its institutes remain to be under the shadow of an elitist system. The gross enrollment rate in the tertiary education sector in 2008 was lower than the 1990 "pre-independence" levels, as well as considerably lower than the Europe & Central Asia (ECA) average of 55.37% (see Figure 1).

This very low enrollment rate in higher education is primarily explained by the admission bottleneck imposed on the higher education sector, wherein every year the Government arbitrarily sets student admission quotas for all programs, whether government subsidized or self-financed, and in both public and private universities. The gap between the demand for higher education and its supply in terms of total number of places offered in universities (both public and private) has grown dramatically between 2002 and 2008 (see Figure 2). But low enrollment shouldn't necessarily preclude an education system from ensuring equal access; equity is not a measure of how many students access higher education but of how fairly the access

**Figure 1: Azerbaijan's Tertiary Gross Enrollment Rate one of the Lowest in the Region.**




| | AZE | UZB | UKR | TUR | TJK | RUS | LVA | KGZ | EST | BLR | MDA | LTU | KAZ | LMI | ECA |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1990 | 23.87 | 31.44 | 48.09 | 13.13 | 22.75 | 53.32 | 25.51 | 14.90 | 26.77 | 51.33 | 35.86 | 34.01 | 41.60 | 8.62 | 33.88 |
| 2003 | 15.31 | 13.95 | 60.67 | 28.18 | 15.40 | 65.70 | 71.30 | 40.04 | 64.14 | 60.16 | 33.30 | 68.34 | 44.01 | 16.40 | 46.16 |
| 2008 | 15.75 | 9.95 | 79.44 | 38.37 | 20.15 | 77.19 | 69.20 | 51.96 | 63.71 | 72.84 | 40.00 | 77.30 | 46.92 | 20.97 | 55.37 |

Source of data: Education Statistics (EdStats), The World Bank.[2]

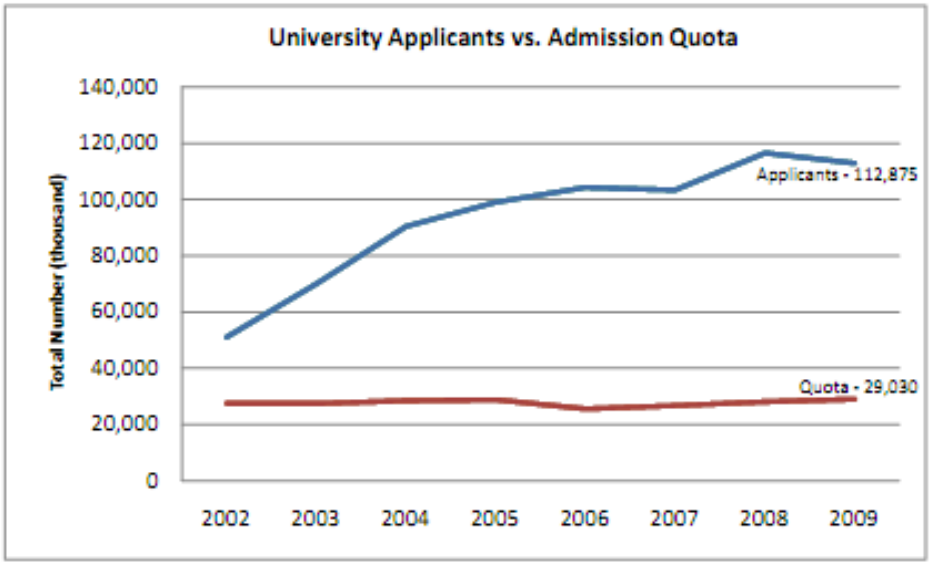
[1] The World Bank Education Statistics (EdStats), accessed November 21, 2010, http://databank.worldbank.org.

[2] AZE-Azerbaijan, UZB-Uzbekistan, UKR-Ukraine, TUR-Turkey, TJK-Tajikistan, RUS-Russian Federation, LVA-Latvia, KGZ-Kyrgyz Republic, EST-Estonia, BLR-Belarus, MDA-Moldova, LTU-Lithuania, KAZ-Kazakhstan, LMI-Low & Middle Income countries, ECA-Europe and Central Asia

to such opportunities is distributed among various groups. Therefore, even though it is widely believed that a rapid expansion of the sector can significantly improve access in higher education, as I will explain, low enrollment rate in higher education caused by government's restrictive university admission quotas is not the main factor contributing to inequitable access in Azerbaijan.

Access in higher education in Azerbaijan is mainly restrained by two interconnected factors: the low quality of secondary education in rural areas and the impact of socioeconomic and geographical factors of access in higher education. As I will show, most Azerbaijani students encounter barriers in accessing higher education before entering college. Although the national university admission test provides equal opportunities to everyone, as suggested by the data below, benefiting from these "opportunities" is considerably constrained for applicants coming from rural areas. To determine whether this assumption has merit I first delve at the rate of transition to higher education among eligible new graduates from high schools (hereafter eligible new graduates)[3] by region (urban and rural), since it is a good estimate of access in higher education.

**Figure 2: The Gap in Demand vs. Supply Has Grown Larger During 2002-2008.**




Analysis based on the student admission data provided by the State Student Admission Commission.[4]

(developing only).

[3]Eligibility refers to whether a student passes the High School Graduation Exam upon completion of the 11th (final) grade to receive a High School Certificate. In Azerbaijan, failure to pass the graduation exam disqualifies one from taking the university admission exam.

[4] "Statistical Analysis of the 2009/2010 Admission Examination Results," official publication

Azerbaijan consists of 66 rural districts and 13 urban districts. The data presented in the graph below (see Figure 3) shows the total number (75,237)[5] of eligible new graduates who passed the High school graduation exam in 2009; those of eligible new graduates who applied for admission to universities in the same year (56,262); and the total number of applicants who were admitted to HEIs (19,464), all of which are categorized in two geographic groups - urban and rural. In 2009, the share of new eligible graduates from the urban areas included in this analysis constituted 44% of all new graduates in Azerbaijan, whereas the total population of these urban areas accounted for approximately 35% of the total population of the country[6].

The analysis of data for the two stages of transition from high school to higher education (i.e. application and admission) shows that already in the application stage the share of new secondary graduates from urban areas went up from 44% to 55%, surpassing the number of new graduates from rural areas and the trend continued up to the final stage oftransition, where the share of new graduates from urban areas admitted to universities constituted 63% of the total group population. It is noteworthy to point out the rather high attrition rate among eligible new graduates from rural areas who did not even apply to take the exam: only about 8% of new secondary graduates from the above mentioned urban areas opted not to apply to HEIs, while the ratio for rural areas was about 39%, higher than the national average of 26%. The overall transition rate to higher education among the new graduates in this group was close to 37% for urban areas and 17% for the rural areas compared to the national average of 25%.

This gap in transition to higher education between urban and rural areas is widening. For each of the selected 3 urban and 16 rural districts, the graph below plots the ratio of admitted new graduates to the total number of new graduates who applied from that district (see Figure 4). It shows the regional variation in admission rates to higher education for 2004 and 2009, but not only that; the

"Abituriyent" of the State Student Admission Commission 12 (2009): 19, accessed December 2, 2010

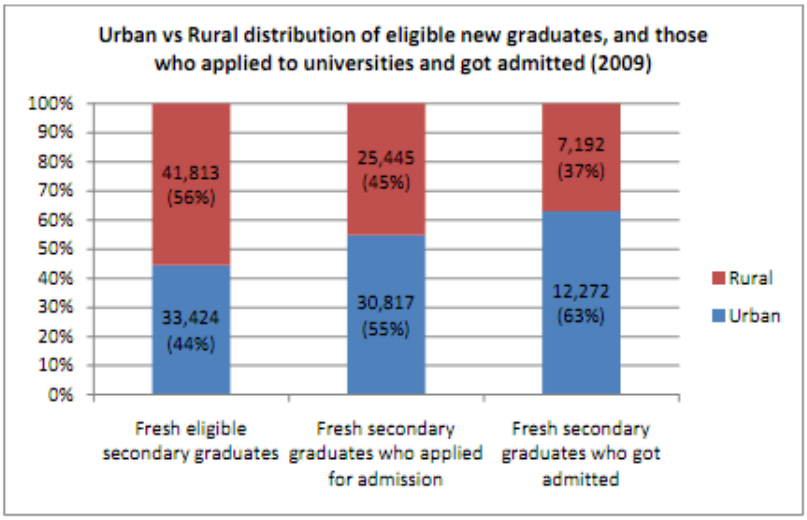
[5]For the analysis in Figure 3, the urban group includes Azerbaijan's 6 largest cities - Baku, Ganja, Sumgayit, Mingachevir, Shirvan, Nakhchivan, as well as Naftalan and the district of Absheron (the latter encompasses the outskirts of Baku and is a part of the greater Baku area); the rural group includes 59 rural districts. The urban data discounts the cities of Lankaran, Sheki and Yevlakh because the only available data for these cities is aggregated with the data from rural areas surrounding them. The total number of 2009 secondary graduates in these three cities and adjacent rural areas was 4,120 students or 4.9% of all 2009 graduates in Azerbaijan. The analysis also discounts the data for 7 rural districts and 3 cities which are under occupation by neighboring Armenia since 1994 and whose population is scattered across various regions of the country. The total number of 2009 secondary graduates from these ten areas was 5,021 students or 6% of all 2009 graduates.

[6]Online database of the State Statistical Committee of Azerbaijan Republic, accessed December 3, 2010, http://www.azstat.org/statinfo/demoqraphic/en/010.shtml#s9.

steepness of the 2009 trend line compared to that of 2004, is indicative of the deepened imbalance in admission to higher education among the sampled nineteen districts. More importantly, the admission rate in all of the rural districts was below the national average of 33.7%. Baku and Sumgayit are shown to have significantly contributed to and driven up the national average.

Analysis based on the SSAC data. The numbers are only of eligible new graduates and do

**Figure 3: Urban-Rural Disparity in Transition to Higher Education.**

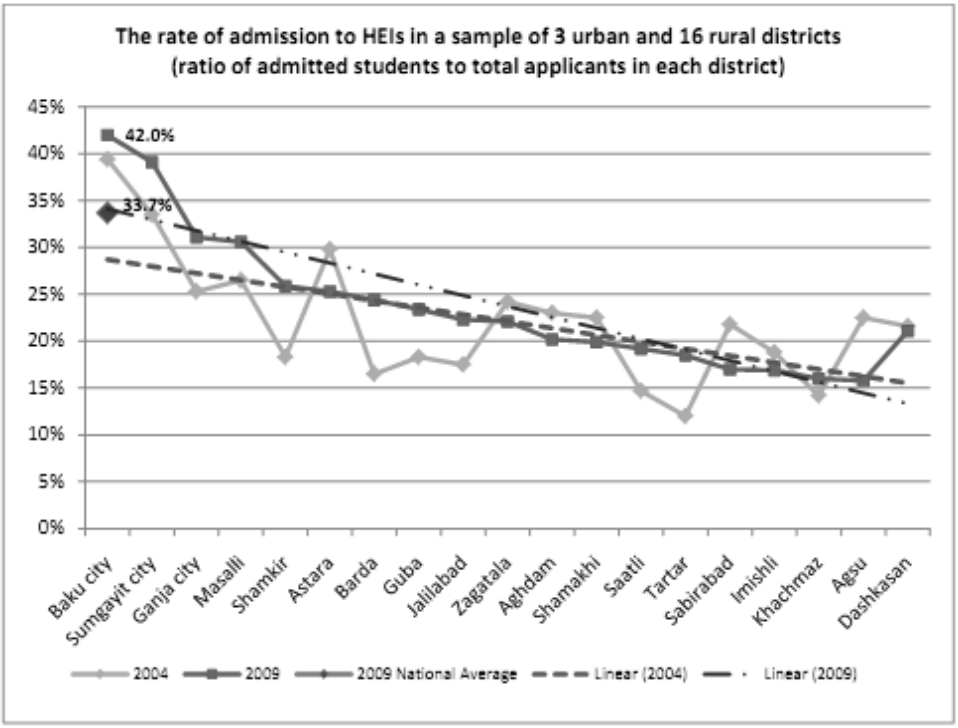



not include the repeat applicants from previous years.[7]

Another important aspect of inequitable access in higher education in Azerbaijan stems from the large gap in educational outcomes by types of secondary schools. Data show that graduates of several dozen public high schools called lyceums concentrated primarily in Baku, as well as private Turkish schools, have consistently outperformed graduates from the rest of the country in university admission exams over the past decade; these said schools have a very high rate of transition to higher education institutions. On the opposite side of the spectrum, there are hundreds of high schools, mostly in the rural and remote areas that consistently see zero or close to zero transition to higher education among their graduates. In 2009, 850 out of 3,143 participating schools from around the country had zero number of graduates proceed to higher education (zero transition) mainly because they scored low in university admission exams. By comparison,18 out of 29 schools in the Agsu districtand 12 out of 20 schools in the Dashkasan district, both of which are rural areas, were among the zero transition schools in 2009, while none of the 310 schools in Baku city and none out of 49 schools in Sumgayit city, and only 2 out of

[7] "Statistical Analysis of the 2009/2010 Admission Examination Results," 189.

**Figure 4: The Urban-Rural Gap in the Admission Rates is Persistent Over Time.**




Analysis based on the SSAC data (2004-2009).[8] The numbers used in the analysis are those of new secondary graduates only and do not include the repeat applicants from previous years.

31 schools in the district of Absheron (in the outskirts of Baku) fell in that category.[9] This combination of stark regional and between-school imbalances in transition rates to higher education is persistent over time and shows no signs of improvement (see Figure 5). In 2010, only 6 out of 316 schools in Baku city, 1 out of 49 schools in Sumgayit city and 1 out of 33 schools in Absheron district fell into the failed category, while 21 out of 32 schools in Agsu region and 15 out of 20 schools in Dashkasan region had zero transition.[10] This regional imbalance in the distribution

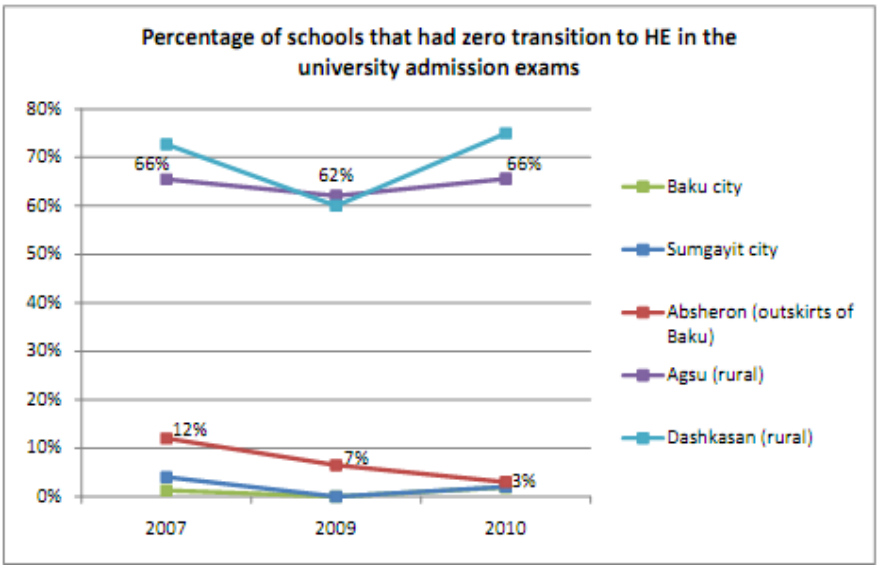
[8] Ibidem; and
"Statistical Analysis of the 2004/2005 Admission Examination Results," official publication "Abituriyent" of the State Student Admission Commission 12 (2004): 155, accessed December 2, 2010 http://tqdk.gov.az/Content/statistic/PDF/abit12 04.pdf

[9] "Statistical Analysis of the 2009/2010 Admission Examination Results," 103-137

[10] "Statistical Analysis of the 2010/2011 Admission Examination Results," official publication "Abituriyent" of the State Student Admission Commission 12 (2010): 162-202, accessed December 26, 2010, http://tqdk.gov.az/Content/statistic/PDF/abit12 2011.pdf

of failed schools is consistent with the larger picture, i.e. the wide gap between the performance of urban and rural secondary graduates in university admission exams.

**Figure 5: Some Districts Have Disproportionately Large Concentration of "Failed" Schools.**




Analysis based on the SSAC data.[11]

## CAUSES OF INEQUITABLE ACCESS

The first and foremost explanation for inequitable access in higher education in Azerbaijan that seems to have merit is the striking disparity in the quality of educational outcomes at the secondary level between urban and rural areas. The most comprehensive measure of the quality and equality of outcomes in secondary education in Azerbaijan is the

High school graduation exam. This exam is also a good way for assessing equity of access in higher education owing to the fact that it has a national coverage and measures educational outcomes right before the high school graduates get to college.

[11] Ibidem.
"Statistical Analysis of the 2009/2010 Admission Examination Results," 103-137;
"Statistical Analysis of the 2007/2008 Admission Examination Results," official publication "Abituriyent" of the State Student Admission Commission 12 (2007): 100-136, accessed December 3, 2010, http://tqdk.gov.az/Content/statistic/PDF/abit12_07.pdf.

The nationwide achievement gap in the High school graduation exam between urban and rural students at the secondary level is significant. The graph in Figure 6 plots the ratio of new secondary graduates in a sample of urban and rural areas who had passed the High school graduation exam and received a high school certificate to become eligible to apply to universities in 2009.[12] As Figure 6 shows, students from rural areas lag far behind urban students in successfully completing high school. The national average is largely driven by performance in urban areas; by comparison the successful graduation rate in rural districts like Gadabay (45.6%), Agjabadi (48.5) or Agsu (49.5%) is considerably lower than the national average (77.9%).
Turkish Lyceums Nakchivan Auton. Rep. Lyceums (public & private) Sumgayit city Baku city Mingachevir city Ganja city Absheron (surrounds Baku) National Average Lankaran Hajigabul Salyan Bilasuvar Beylagan Shamkir Djalilabad Masalli Yardimli Barda Astara Lerik Agsu Agjabadi Gadaba Analysis based on the SSAC data.[13] This geographic variance in the quality of educational outcomes at the secondary level is partly explained by the fact that Azerbaijan experiences a severe shortage of qualified teaching staff in rural areas due to recruitment difficulties. Table 1 shows the improvement over the years in the shortage of teaching staff in general schools (grades 1 to 11) nationwide. Prior to 2005, Azerbaijan was understaffed by 6,643 teachers to staff general schools across the country (predominantly in rural areas and remote villages), despite the fact that 22 HEIs and 9 tertiary vocational colleges were producing about 8,000 pedagogical staff every year.[14] Clearly, Azerbaijan has been slow in mobilizing its resources and effectively responding to the problem of staffing shortages in rural areas.

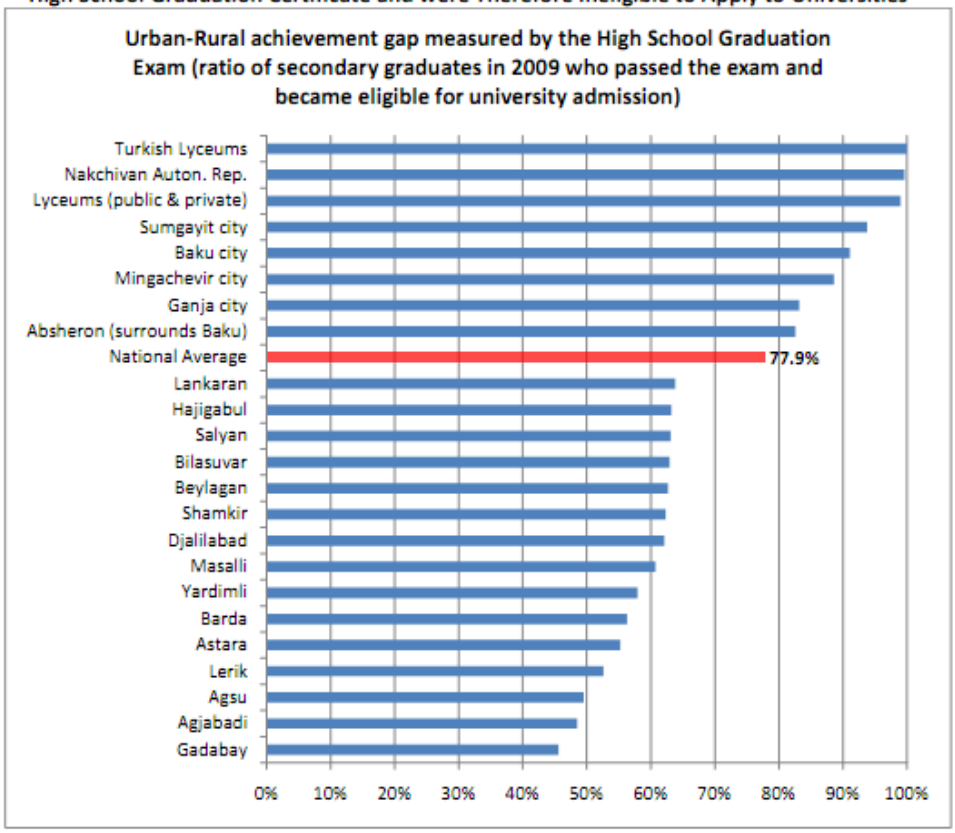
**Table 1: Teacher shortage in general schools is substantial.**

| | |
|---|---|
| 2005-2006 | 6,643 |
| 2006-2007 | 5,558 |
| 2007-2008 | 4,716 |
| 2008-2009 | 3,979 |
| 2009-2010 | 2,457 |

Source: Ministry of Education of Azerbaijan Republic.

[12] This is a non-random sample of regions. The total population of new secondary graduates in the sampled regions was approximately 60% of the total graduate population of Azerbaijan in 2009.
[13] "Statistical Analysis of the 2009/2010 Admission Examination Results," 189.
[14] The official website of the Ministry of Education of Azerbaijan Republic, accessed November 28, 2010, http://www.edu.gov.az/view.php?lang=az&menu=153&id=948.

**Figure 6: Significantly More Students in Rural Areas Who Graduated in 2009 Failed to Receive High School Graduation Certificate and were Therefore Ineligible to Apply to Universities**




Analysis based on the SSAC data.

There is no direct evidence of economic barriers to access in higher education, nor any comprehensive data compiled on the economic background of students who are admitted to HEIs, but there are many issues that implicate economic factors for inequitable access between urban and rural areas. There is widespread belief among students and their parents that the quality of the general education is inadequate and that those who aspire to be admitted in tertiary education institutions need private tutoring to increase their chances in the national admission exams. The growing demand for private tutoring has driven up the costs. The cost of private tutoring which ranges from 50 to 150 AZN (63-189 USD) monthly per subject, particularly in the case of tutoring by teachers who are members of the so-called subject boards at the State Student Admission Commission (SSAC), far exceeds the 85 AZN (107 USD) minimum wage rate in Azerbaijan, putting low-income families at a severe disadvantage. Private spending on tutoring likewise increases the probability of doing better on university admission exam, and

therefore not only provides better opportunities to access higher education for those who can afford private tutoring, but also increases their chances for placement in state subsidized tuition-free programs in public universities. Equally, students from low-income families and rural areas (which have a greater proportion of low-income families and higher poverty incidence) have limited or no pre-exam tutoring and are likely to perform poorly on the university admission exam.

The government's support to students proceeding to higher education is provided mainly in the form of a tuition remission (limited to only students in public universities prior to 2010 but now extended to private universities as well), which is granted on the basis of a student's performance on the university admission exam, and a monthly stipend provided to students in tuition-free programs who maintain good academic standing. Additionally, a limited number of merit-based scholarships as well as Presidential stipends are awarded for outstanding achievement and the State program for study abroad finances students to study in universities overseas. But at present Azerbaijan does not have any targeted assistance programs such as need-based scholarships or student loans to support students from low-income families. Institutions also lack assistance in the form of tuition fee waivers or deferment for disadvantaged students (except for the students from refugee and internally displaced families). Such programs are also inaccessible for students with disabilities. In general, almost all of the state financing provided to students (both at the system and institutional levels) are predominantly merit-based with disregard for those who actually are in need of financialassistance. By comparison, at the start of the 2010/2011 academic year, the average monthly nominal salary in the country was 319 AZN (401 USD)[15], while annual tuition fees reached 2,800 AZN (3,520 USD) in public and 4,000 AZN (5,030 USD)[16] in private universities constituting a serious barrier for students from low-income households.

Another barrier that goes beyond tuition considerations is the suboptimal distribution of the network of higher education institutions, which aggravate the existing urban/rural imbalance in accessing higher education across the country. This barrier is a blend of social-economic and geographic complications where the concentration of HEIs in Baku and surrounding areas is a key deterrent for students from poor families and rural areas who consider higher education. For example, while the ratio of applicants from the greater Baku area (including the repeat applicants from previous years) who took the university admission exam in 2009 was only 36.6%

[15] Press release of the State Statistical Committee of Azerbaijan Republic, accessed December 7, 2010, http://www.ayna.az/2010-10-30/cemiyyet/4093-iqtisadi-feal-ArifVeliyev-.

[16] The currency exchange rate used USD/AZN 0.795 as set by the Central Bank of Azerbaijan Republic for February 13, 2011.

of all test-takers nationwide, 42 out of 51 (82%) public and private universities in Azerbaijan were located in the capital Baku.[17] Furthermore, close to 78% of the total admission quota for higher education in Azerbaijan was allocated to the above HEIs located in Baku. While the bulk of higher education institutions are concentrated in the capital, the monthly stipends that are only provided to students who are admitted into state-subsidized programs are not sufficient enough to cover the real cost of living in Baku, more so for rural applicants. In 2009 student monthly stipends at the undergraduate level ranged from AZN 40 to AZN 80 (USD 50-100).[18] According to the Economic Research Center (ERC) as of December 2010 the per capita monthly minimum living cost for the working-age population in Azerbaijan was estimated at 161 AZN (203 USD)[19], which means that the current level of student stipends is insufficient to cover the even higher living cost in Baku. It is important to note that while university dormitories formerly played a crucial role in facilitating access to higher education for the rural population, most universities nowadays have limited or no residential facilities at all. In the early years of its independence Azerbaijan saw rapidly shrinking dormitory capacities due to the massive exodus of civilians from Armenia and the territories affected by the war in the Nagorno Karabakh region to Baku where most HEIs were concentrated. Although initially provided as temporary housing to the refugee and IDP population, these dormitories have now been in permanent use for almost 18 years due to the continued occupation of nearly 20 percent of Azerbaijan's territories. It is hard not to conclude that limited student housing and increased cost of living in Baku is responsible, at least in part, for these differences in access to higher education of the rural population.

The analysis of student performance in the High school graduation exam and the university admission examination both show that access to higher education is greatly obstructed by the relatively poor quality of education in rural secondary schools, which leads to lower high school graduation rates and lower transition rate to higher education. Furthermore, socioeconomic factors, namely the costs and availability of private tutoring and costs of higher education (both the tuition fee and the cost of living), may have had a strong restrictive effect for students from rural areas to access higher education. Furthermore, the logistical difficulties owing to the fact that the admission exam was organized only in 3 major cities, alongside

[17] Ministry of Education website, accessed December 14, 2010 http://www.edu.gov.az/view.php?lang=en&menu=339&id=1696

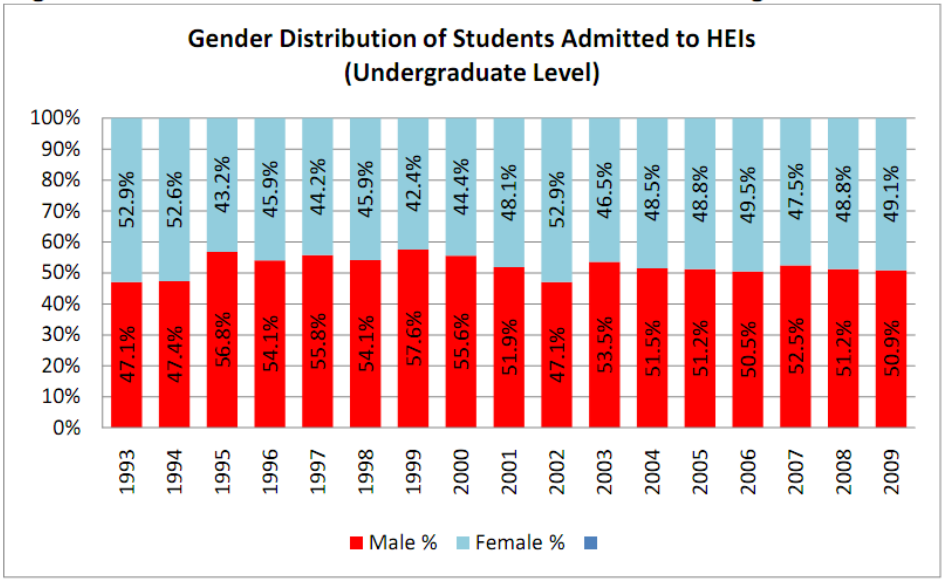
[18] Presidential Decree dated September 6, 2010 as posted on the official website of the Ministry of Education of Azerbaijan Republic, accessed December 5, 2010, http://www.edu.gov.az/view.php?lang=en&menu=73&id=2511.

[19] Website of the Economic Research Center (ERC), accessed January 27, 2011, http://erc-az.org/new/view.php?lang=en&menu=0&id=789.

household financial considerations, is also likely to have contributed to the high fall out rate among the eligible new secondary graduates. Under these circumstances, it is reasonable to conclude that participation in higher education in Azerbaijan is highly inequitable in favor of students from high-income families and urban areas and that a significant number of students placed in government subsidized tuition-free programs are likely to have come from relatively affluent families from capital Baku and its surrounding areas that could actually afford self-financed programs and related educational expenses.

Data on the gender distribution of students in higher education also show signs of a slight imbalance in overall admission rates, and more so in specific specialization areas. According to the SSAC data, female applicants constituted 51.2% of all university applicants in 2009, but the share of female applicants admitted to higher education institutions in the same year was 49.1% as shown in Figure 7, which still was an improvement from the all-time low of 42.4% in 1999. Overall, despite the gender imbalance that remains in university participation, a steady improvement has been observed in female participation in higher education since 2007.

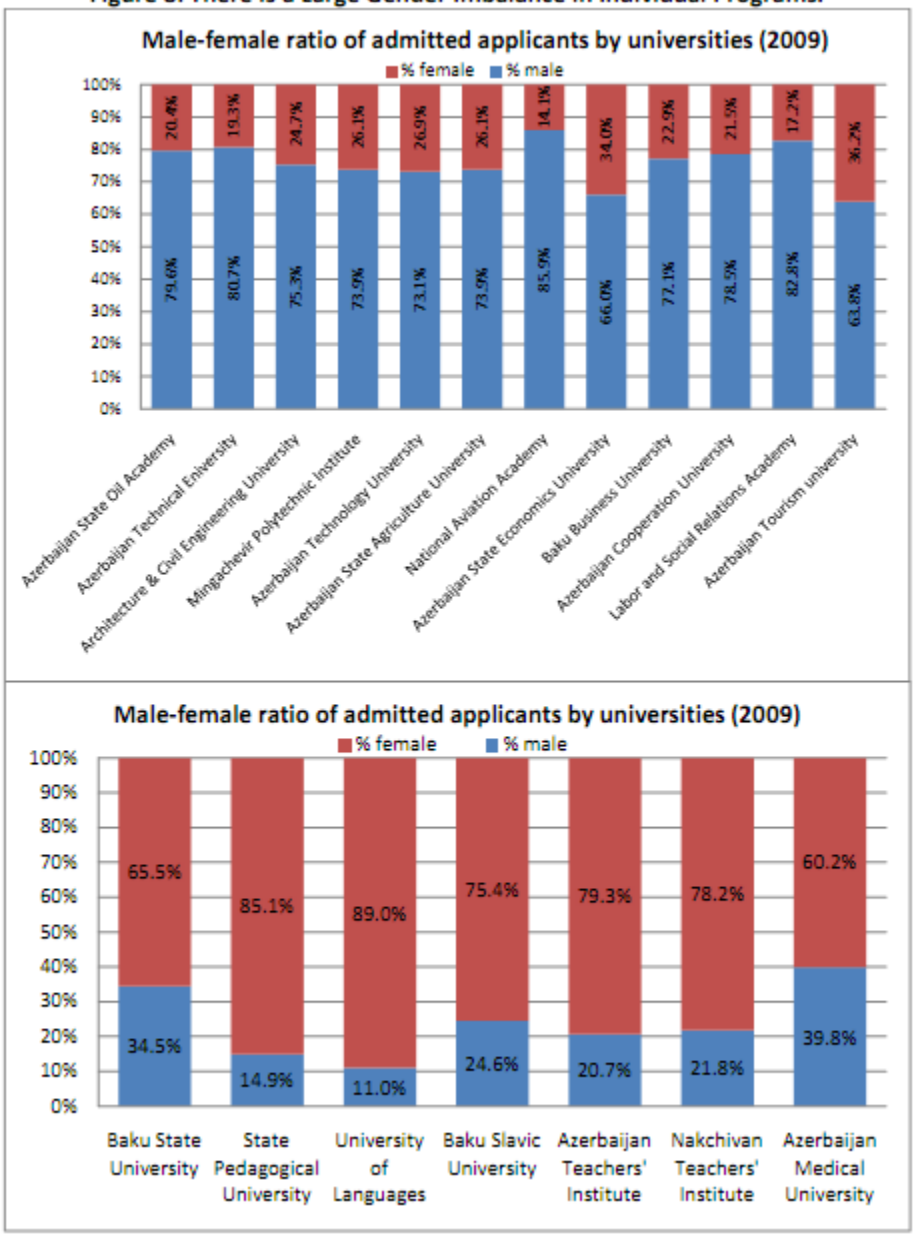
**Figure 7: There is Incremental Decline in Gender Imbalance in Higher Education.**




Analysis based on the SSAC data.[20]

[20] "Statistical Analysis of the 2009/2010 Admission Examination Results," 179.

**Figure 8: There is a Large Gender Imbalance in Individual Programs.**




Analysis based on the SSAC data[21]

[21] "Statistical Analysis of the 2009/2010 Admission Examination Results," 180.

A different aspect of gender imbalance graphed below shows that women are severely underrepresented in admission to certain fields, such as engineering and technology, economics and business, while overrepresented in other, gradually feminizing specialties such as linguistics, pedagogy and medicine.

An important aspect of inequity in accessing higher education is related to accessibility for students with disabilities. There are currently no available data or studies on the extent of this problem and no specific government programs or funds have been designated for this purpose. However, the existence of a serious problem in this area is obvious judging by the fact that most if not all public universities are not equipped to serve students with disabilities and have never adapted their facilities to provide access for students in wheelchairs.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The findings of this analysis offer clear indications of an impending social and economic challenge due to inequitable educational opportunities and should be sufficient to call the attention of the educational community in Azerbaijan to the need for more policy-oriented research, as well as informed and evidence-based policy-making.

In spite of the progressive nature of the new approaches adopted in regard to various aspects of the higher education system, the changes implemented by the Government of Azerbaijan so far have yielded little impact on moderating the inequities owing to certain systemic obstacles, as well as the narrow definition and scope of the new concepts introduced in the education sector.

The issue of equity in accessing higher education has not been a part of the government's reform agenda in higher education in the past two decades despite the substantial challenges facing the country in this area. The government has shown very limited interest in assessing the gravity of this issue and mitigating the impact of policies and regulations on the existing inequity between urban and rural areas. Higher education system in Azerbaijan is rarely evaluated on the metric of equity.

Although the introduction of a national university admission examination in the early 1990s was an important step towards improving access in higher education and has proven to be a very effective tool in eradicating corruption in the university admission process, the centralized exam merely provided a basis for ensuring fairness in accessing higher education. Its impact on the equity aspect of access is limited due mainly to the growing gap in the quality of secondary education outcomes between regions and by types of schools; prevailing

socioeconomic barriers to accessing higher education; the lack of a government strategy for targeted assistance to students with financial needs; and concentration of higher education institutions in the capital Baku. The current state tuition assistance scheme is driven solely by the student admission examination scores and does not envisage need-based financial support with the exception of students from refugee and IDP families; nor are there any tuition deferment programs or student loans to alleviate the socioeconomic barriers for disadvantaged students.

The long-term social and financial effects of the sustained inequity in Azerbaijan can be very costly, as it limits the social mobility of the rural population and hampers their social and economic development. This situation is likely to generate higher future social protection costs for the state in connection with the relatively lower level of educational achievement and incomes of the population in rural areas. Therefore, the steps that should be taken in preparation to the expansion of higher education must focus on improving those mentioned conditions. Otherwise, the rapid expansion of higher education runs the risk of benefiting predominantly graduates from urban high schools and well-to-do households, thereby worsening the gap in access to higher education between urban and rural areas.

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## Summary

## Azerbaijan: How Equitable is Access to Higher Education?

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This paper aims to shed light on some of the issues that impede the development of higher education sector in Azerbaijan, focusing on the growing inequality in the educational outcomes at the secondary level and the ensuing unequal access in higher education. It assesses the performance of the education sector in the Republic of Azerbaijan in terms of ensuring equitable access in higher education (H.E.) across the country. A comparison of university admission rates among different groups in question acts as a fairly good proxy for most aspects of equity in access in higher education. For that reason, this analysis first considers the disparity in higher education admission rates between urban and rural areas. After establishing geographical (urban-rural) disparities in the transition to H.E., it continues to present arguments to suggest that a considerable part of the existing regional inequality in Azerbaijan is attributable to unequal educational choices and opportunities. Specifically, it shows how cross sectional data are consistent with the initial assumption that the H.E. system in Azerbaijan is significantly predisposed to students from urban areas and affluent families, and how current educational policies and regulations exacerbate inequitable access.

**Key Words:** higher education, access, equity.